



Conspicuous Generosity and Its Private Consequences

My dad, Stephen Sandridge, had a lot of mantras, and one of them was that it was better to celebrate payday on Friday with your buddies than make the mortgage payment on Monday. One of his favorite things to do was head to the pool hall with some good friends and buy rounds of beer and dozens of hot wings long into the night. It was not uncommon to bet \$100 or more on these games. In fact, as he reported to me, this was how he paid part of my tuition in my freshman year of college.

I was fortunate enough to accompany my dad on a great many of these outings and I got to see real friendship and camaraderie on display time and time again, whether it was bonding over the songs on the juke box, a favorite brand of beer, or gossip about anyone who wasn't there. My dad was always there for his friends and used to say that a true friend was someone who would bail you out of jail at three in the morning with no questions asked--and I am certain my dad did need to be bailed out of jail on occasion.

One final note about my dad's relationships to money and friends before I get to my main story. In his younger days he had a passion for fine things. He loved cars like his Austin Healey or Ford Mustang, and he so admired one of the characters from *West Side Story* that he bought himself a replica Oleg Cassini suit when he lived in New York in the 1960s. Yet by the time I knew my father, all of his tastes had become quite modest. He never bought himself fancy clothes or jewelry, and my parents lived in the same house for over 35 years until he died, even though dozens of neighborhoods much nicer had been built around them. My dad was not the kind of person who would order the most expensive thing on the menu at a restaurant. Rather, he would buy that for *you*. He liked to splurge without

warning on those around him, including his family. Before I left for graduate school in classics in the fall of 1997, he took me to the Men's Wearhouse and bought me the fanciest clothes I had ever owned, an Oscar de la Renta suit with wingtips, which I still have. His reasoning was *that's what a future classics professor should wear*. As we checked out at the register, I watched as the total burgeoned to nearly thousand dollars with expensive item. Though I had never felt more stylish, I cringed to think how he had paid for it. To be precise, I knew how he had paid for it, with a credit card, which was more and more the fashion those days. What I cringed over was in wondering when he would pay the bill or what other bills would be deferred: electricity? water? phone? doctor? I never knew.

How my dad's generosity played itself out in a leadership context is best captured by what happened at an event on Thursday, September 9, 2010. I know the date because my brother saved the newspaper clipping and related the story to me. Anyone who knew my dad well would recognize the man in full from this one story. The event was billed as a "charity roast" to raise funds via ticket sales and silent auction for the state senator Chip Rogers. By this point in his life my dad had lived in the community of Cherokee County, GA for almost thirty-five years and had what you might call a soft but almost ubiquitous political influence. He held no public office and had almost no wealth to speak of. He owned his own pest control company, Pied Piper Pest control, which had a few employees, including my brother. Dad knew everyone both low and high--city council members, judges, sheriffs, millionaires--by virtue of his membership to the local Optimist Club and his fearless sociability. If a mechanic didn't know the mayor, dad made sure that they were introduced and came across as the most important person in the room just by playing the matchmaker. He was almost a caricature of a "true southerner" the way he would welcome a "yankee" only if he wasn't so "uppity."

At this fundraising event, though, dad met his match when a double-barrel, antique shotgun, up for auction, caught his eye. Bidding on it would prove to be irresistible and reveal the downside to his conspicuous generosity. Here was a

chance to show his support for a rising political star, destined for Washington (or “Warshington” in my dad’s Virginia mountain accent). This was also a chance to show off his passion for guns, nurtured not by movies but by growing up on a fifty-two-acre farm. Added to this perfect storm was the fact that my dad got into a bidding war with another of his close friends, the city manager at the time. In a single act my dad was able to show his support for a powerful politician, to signal his authentic alliance with rural southern gun culture, and strengthen (and signal) the bonds of friendship. And, in case it’s not obvious, running in such circles was one of the main ways my dad maintained and secured new business for his pest control company. Government contracts and relationships with builders were always tenuous, especially in the recession of 2008, which was still being felt at this time with a devastating downturn in construction. So, this kind of conspicuous generosity could be seen as financially prudent.

The only catch was that my dad ended up paying a whopping four-thousand dollars for the antique shotgun. My brother reports that he remarked to a coworker who was also at the fundraiser, “I wonder whose paycheck is going to bounce because of this.” Sure enough, it was my brother’s. He then started looking for a new job.

This story has made me wonder how many people make a show of generosity (what I have called “conspicuous generosity”), particularly in a political context, gambling on the hope that it will give them the social capital to elevate their status or generate new business. Generosity is usually a signal of comfort and ease, that the person giving has more than enough for their own needs and can give things away without a care. Yet, in the case of my dad, generosity was a mode of survival from paycheck to paycheck. If I had to guess, there is probably more desperation that lies behind conspicuous generosity than the performance of it would lead us to believe.

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